Crying in the Desert?

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Speaking about God in our time

People in our time, who have a calling to speak about God, often are in dire straits. In the intellectual sphere, the so-called 'masters of suspicion' still seem to dominate the discussion about religion. They profoundly marked the religious debate during the past century. Their propositions are common knowledge: according to Marx, religion is an alienated consciousness, while in the eyes of Freud, it is the result of an infantile illusion, and for Nietzsche Christian monotheism is a dubious 'monoto-notheism', which fossilises and mummifies the infinite diversity of life. Together they have given a certain intellectual plausibility to non-religious points of view. As a result of this, being non-religious has become the social and intellectual standard, whereas a religious perspective on man and world is now the exception. The man or woman who has a calling to speak about God in this situation cannot but see him- or herself as someone crying in the desert.[1]

1. Questioning the project of the Enlightenment

Are these well-known schemes of interpretation still determinative for the (in)capacity to speak about God, or have alternative approaches to

this issue been developed meanwhile? In my opinion, there is a lot to be said for that the latter in fact is the case, although we have to interpret these alternative ways of speaking about God and religion critically. They have in common a questioning of the project of the Enlightenment. In order to illustrate this, I want to start from a quotation of Gianni Vattimo, an Italian philosopher, who, according to his own saying, belongs to the same philosophical tradition as Nietzsche and Heidegger. In his recent book *Belief (Credere di credere)* he writes: "Today there are no longer strong, plausible philosophical reasons to be atheist, or at any rate to dismiss religion. Atheistic rationalism had taken two forms in modernity: belief in the exclusive truth of the experimental natural sciences, and faith in history's progress towards the full emancipation of humanity from any transcendent authority. (...) Today, however, both belief in objective truth and faith in the progress of Reason towards full transparency appear to have been defeated.[2]

What does this remark mean? With this, Vattimo expresses his basic scepticism, not to say suspicion, with regard to the ideal of rational control and planning of nature and history, which dominates our thinking since the Enlightenment. In this opinion he is not alone. Quite a lot of people have lost their faith in the objective truth of the experimental sciences. Following the optimism of the Enlightenment positivism and scientism predicted a very sunny future for mankind. People thought science to be capable of solving basically all problems of mankind in an objective, scientific way. Meanwhile, this optimism has proven to be naive, causing a disenchantment of the idea of (scientific) progress.[3] The complexity of moral dilemmas concerning questions about life and death has increased dramatically. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether science has brought any nearer the solution of the most important world-problems, such as the quality of our natural environment, war and peace, poverty etc. Another aspect of the optimism of the Enlightenment, viz. the trust that mankind would be able to guide the course of history in the right direction, has

2 G. Vattimo, *Belief. Translated by L. D'isanto and D. Webb*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, pp. 28-9.
3 Idem, p. 29.

proven to be false as well. Both World Wars have made us face the fact that the course of history does not show a positive dialectic at all.

In his book, *L'humanité perdue. Essai du vingtième siècle,* the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut also examines these questions. He tries to take stock philosophically of the twentieth century. The title of this book accurately summarises its essence: in spite of its dominant faith in the progress of humanity, the twentieth century has rather shown its decline. Mankind has lost its humanity. On the basis of this, Finkielkraut reflects on the consequences for human civilisation of the optimism of the Enlightenment. He especially examines both World Wars, being the most traumatic experiences of the twentieth century. They have revealed the falseness of this optimism with utmost clarity. At the end of this century "one cannot maintain anymore in peace and quiet that reality is always rational, because the irrational itself is necessary for the realisation of Reason. Dialectics gets stuck and even talks gibberish. There is no visible or hidden reason at work when the national passions run wild; reason itself seems to have gone out of its mind. (...) The optimism of the Enlightenment is no longer acceptable. The event that has happened [the First and Second World Wars] shuts the door on qualifying the fantastic boom of the capacities and the knowledge of mankind as a progress of its humanity."[4]

The penetrating question of both Finkielkraut and Vattimo as a result of these and other, equally violent events is whether they have to be seen as an accidental, temporary relapse of modern civilisation or as its unavoidable drawback. Their analyses give sufficient cause to put the latter. The dismay about this conclusion inevitably leads to a critical examination of the project of the Enlightenment. The enlightened faith in the unlimited technical and rational powers of mankind to realise a heaven on earth and especially the belief in its infinite moral perfection has become incredible. As psychoanalysis teaches us, that what man systematically tries to repress, viz. his moral and intellectual finitude, returns indirectly. As the human will to control everything is growing more and more, its drawback, viz. the uncontrollable and incalculable, is casting an

4 A. Finkielkraut, *L'humanité perdue. Essai sur le XXe siècle*. Paris, Du Seuil, 1996, pp. 99-100

increasingly dark shadow over our civilisation. As the conviction is growing that history can be planned by reason, man becomes more and more powerless about his unreasonable barbarity, which violates reason.

Proponents of the project of the Enlightenment perhaps will knit their brows together while reading Vattimo's and Finkielkraut's propositions. Aren't these two philosophers simply singing the same old song, because they do not know how to cope with modernity? And isn't their reaction a reissue of the traditional tune of rejecting modernity and presenting a radically anti-modern alternative to contemporary mankind? Let us not jump to this conclusion. In the first place, the possible relation between the project of the Enlightenment and the violence of technical and historical planning and controlling reason deserves particular attention. Specifically, we have to examine the possibility of criticising certain aspects of the project of the Enlightenment, without ipso facto being driven back on pre-modernity or having recourse to the vague notion of postmodernity. By doing so, we can still value the achievements of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, this criticism of the project of the Enlightenment is coming from philosophers, belonging to the same tradition as the 'masters of suspicion'. This enables them and us to question critically new kinds of dogmatism, for which the Enlightenment gave cause - in a way in spite of itself.

As a result of this analysis, it becomes clear that speaking about God has to meet a primordial condition. It has to avoid the Scylla of an uncritical acceptance and glorification of the project of the Enlightenment, and at the same time steer clear of the Charibdis of a defensive repudiation of modernity as such. If religion is unable to avoid the first obstacle, it has nothing to say to contemporary man. We have seen above that the extremely penetrating, existential question, which the past century left behind, concerns the falseness of the optimism of the Enlightenment. Christianity has to embrace this question in all its sharpness in order to offer contemporary man a credible perspective on his time. However, if religion is incapable of avoiding the other obstacle, a massive repudiation of modernity as such, it keeps out of the current debate as well. Then religion has nothing to say either to contemporary man, whose language, thinking and acting are pervaded by modernity.

2. How to speak about God in our time?

However, there is a second condition that our speaking about God has to meet, and which I want to examine further. In line with the disappointment of contemporary man about the optimism of the Enlightenment, a certain militant atheism, according to which the recognition of a God necessarily is at the expense of the self-esteem of man, has lost much of its credibility. From this observation, one could conclude - together with Vattimo - that there are no longer strong, plausible philosophical reasons to be an atheist, or at any rate to dismiss religion. This may be so, but does this situation as such really offer a good opportunity to speak (again) about God? When we look at the interest of the media in religious and philosophical issues, this conclusion seems to be justified. One can interpret this phenomenon as an attempt of a disenchanted, completely rationalised society to recover what has been lost since the Enlightenment, viz. the sense of the transcendent, of wonder, of the vulnerability of every human being, in sum of what escapes the power of controlling reason. But do all these observations and interpretations really justify the conclusion that there are currently a lot of new opportunities for an intellectual debate about God and religion? To be honest, I don't think so. The actual discourse about religious matters shows that religion is being privatised more and more. It has withdrawn to a large extent from public life into the personal sphere. But furthermore, speaking about religion and philosophy of life has become a purely subjective affair, a matter of individual taste and personal preference, of 'that is just the way I feel it'. And as we all know, there is no disputing about tastes and preferences. In this situation, someone who avows that his or her faith is *true,* e.g. by making a distinction between God and idol, faith and superstition, is usually considered as a very intolerant person. People mostly react to these confessions of faith by saying that 'Everybody has a right to his or her own truth and faith'. Thus, the indisputable increase of the interest in religion is somehow ambiguous. It is accompanied by an equally indisputable indifference with regard to the religious claim to truth and faithfulness. If my committed discourse about God and religion aims to be more than expressing my personal conviction to a group of co-religionists, if I want to do more than preaching to my

own parish, if I want to enter into an intellectual debate with non-religious people, its sense seems to be more problematic than ever.

This paradoxical conclusion needs some explanation. Marx's, Freud's, and Nietzsche's suspicions concerning religion have become a sort of fundamental attitude of contemporary man. He is disappointed about the falsity and deceit of the major ideological systems, both religious and non-religious ones, all claiming to possess ultimate truth and faithfulness. Therefore, he doesn't want to buy any nonsense anymore. As a consequence of this, a lot of people nowadays adopt an ironic attitude towards all their basic convictions. They consider them no longer as referring to reality, but simply as a set of words, a vocabulary serving to express their deepest doubts about themselves and their highest hopes. With the help of these vocabularies they tell the stories of their lives, sometimes looking ahead, sometimes looking back.[5] The truth of these stories does not surpass the circle of its users; it is radically contextual, bound to a particular place and time. Consequently, any discussion exceeding the bounds of these contexts, e.g. a discussion between religious and non-religious people, often ends in an irritated silence because of the mutual ignorance about each other's vocabulary. Thus, truth is not something that is found in an (objective) world, but rather is produced by humans as temporal, accidental beings. Therefore it does not make sense to think that one conviction would do more justice to truth than another. We should rather redescribe our experiences of ourselves, of the world and of God in new ways and with the help of new vocabularies, without committing ourselves to any truth, and certainly without taking ourselves too serious. This distant, ironical attitude of humans with regard to their own convictions, especially with regard to religion and philosophies of life, is characteristic for our time. However, it is at odds with the truth-claims of faith, i.e. that it gives life its ultimate meaning. Being Christian is not the result of a neutral and arbitrary choice between various vocabularies. It is founded upon the basic conviction that Christianity has an existential truth, since Jesus "is the way, the truth, and

5 The American philosopher Richard Rorty offers an excellent analysis of this conviction in R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 73 ff.

the life."[6] Moreover, this truth is not only valid within the context of Christianity, but always and everywhere.

With this conclusion we seem to arrive at an impasse. Someone who has a calling to speak about his faith in God, can only do this in a committed way. This implies that he anyhow testifies to its truth. But when nowadays someone speaks about (the truth of) his faith with other people, not belonging to the circle of fellow believers, he will probably feel like someone crying in the desert. The specific character of such a testimony is at odds with our cultural situation.

Let us try to find a way out of this deadlock. The crucial question is whether someone, who has a calling to speak about God, can make clear that Christianity offers something essential to contemporary man. By approaching this issue in this way, I take an anthropological or rather anthropocentric position concerning religion. My approach of the truth of religion implies asking whether religion can make an essential contribution to the humanisation of mankind and his civilisation. Taking up such a position with regard to faith is significant as such. It reflects the break that modernity produced in the discourse about God: religion is not anymore perceived as the service of God, but as a function in the humanisation of man. The committed *interest* has taken the place of the *theoria,* the decentered witnessing of an external, divine reality. This irreversible cultural change determines, no matter how, our speaking about God. It puts the traditional truth-claims of religion radically to the test, but also opens up new prospects by approaching the issue of the truth of religion in an existential way.

What are these prospects? As said above, the penetrating question that the twentieth century left behind, is how to cope with our intellectual and moral finitude and with the violence they generate. Christianity can prove its existential truth by presenting insights into this extremely complex issue that are essential to contemporary man and representing images of a truly good life, which is worthwhile practising. In the next paragraphs I will discuss two diverging answers to this question. As we will see below,

6 Joh. 14:6.

they differ particularly with regard to the role and meaning of God's transcendence.

3. Kenosis and caritas as the essence of Christianity?

The above mentioned book of Gianni Vattimo's presents a first answer to this question. In order to stop the violence of technically rational and political reason he appeals to his notion of 'weak thinking'. From a historical perspective, it is a continuation of nihilism. Essentially, nihilism is the announcement of the definitive decline of our faith in reality as 'objective data', and of a (metaphysical) thinking, which believed that it could objectify, calculate and manipulate reality, since it thought to have reality as such at its disposal. Vattimo's nihilism is opposed to this objectifying thinking. Therefore nihilism is not something negative, but above all something positive: it announces weak thinking and attests to the dissolution of all strong structures of metaphysics. Religiously, this nihilism is aligned with the transcription of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God or the *kenosis*: God has abased himself to the level of man, He has renounced from his sacral, transcendent character. Thus Vattimo interprets secularisation, i.e. "the process of 'drifting' that removed modern lay civilisation from its sacral origin,"[7] as the essence of Christianity and characterises it as an emancipation par excellence. Secularisation frees human reason "from its dependence upon an absolute God, a fearful Judge who so transcends our ideas about good and evil as to appear as a capricious or bizarre sovereign."[8] Secularisation is also the dissolution of the strong subject with its clear and well-defined ideas about truth and value, on behalf of the defence of the finitude of human existence.

The weakening of strong structures and the dissolution of the strong subject are together the essence of nihilism. And nihilism is, in its turn, the core of the secularised Christian message. Formulated more concretely:

7 G. Vattimo, *Belief*, p. 41.
8 Idem.

the abasement of God to the level of man (the *kenosis*) means that we do not have to consider us anymore as God's servants, but as his friends. The element of Christian tradition that takes a prominent position in weak thinking is 'caritas'. It is the critical principle, which serves as a reference point in order to read the signs of the time, Scripture, and Christian tradition. It is also the 'limit' of secularisation, i.e. of the process of finitising and historising truth and value. The commandment of loving one's neighbour is the only ultimate element in history. Since this love is an immanent principle, it leaves no room any more for God's transcendence. In sum and in line with the question of this paragraph, Vattimo thinks that Christianity can offer something essential to contemporary man and his civilisation if it orientates him towards the immanent commandment of love and carries out a radical disenchantment and secularisation of sacredness and transcendence.

In order to understand how Christianity can defuse the malaise of the Enlightenment, Vattimo presents a few examples of its violent and oppressive character. It becomes manifest on several occasions and in very different shapes. First of all, the violence of the objectifying rationality of technology and science is at stake here, as well as the will of humanity to control the course of history, ending in totalitarianism. Vattimo connects this oppression with specific kinds of religious violence. In this connection, he thinks of the violence resulting from the sacred dimension of nature, and from a similar sacredness, typical of a lot of ecclesiastical decisions, which leads to authoritarianism etc. Of course, these features are by no means specifically modern, but one can safely state that they have pursued themselves to the end during modernity. They have become manifest in the religious wars and other forms of religious intolerance, in the oppression of certain groups of believers, such as women and homosexuals. According to Vattimo, this violence is the result of a way of thinking, which attributes to the deity all characteristics of omnipotence, absoluteness, eternity and transcendence over against powerless, contingent, temporal mankind, or attributes these qualities to the doctrinal authority of the church. When religious authorities are, in the name of the deity, adorned with such an omnipotence, exceeding the bounds of human finitude, they can easily make a sharp distinction between the faithful and heretics, between those who obey God's commandments and those who

violate them, between the chosen and the damned. Here we get an idea of the way in which the violence of reason specifically takes shape in religion. At the basis of all these violent manifestations of technology, politics, and religion lies the illusory conviction that the true nature of reality, the meaning of history, and the will of God can be established objectively, once and for all, and for all people. Such a conviction inevitably leads to violence, more particularly to an oppression of subjective, historical, contingent, and vulnerable humans.

On the basis of his analysis of the violent character of modernity, Vattimo asks how we can and should deal with it. Divergent ideas, such as nihilism, weak thinking, secularisation, *kenosis,* etc. (all having an explicitly favourable meaning for Vattimo) can all be seen as attempts to unmask the fateful faith in controlling reason, history, and the transcendent God, and to counter the violence and oppression that stem from it. The world, humanity and history can never be fixed or closed. According to this way of thinking, we have to demythologise all fixed moralities or established dogmas, and treat them as historical constructions. Finally, we should no longer view God as a transcendent ruler, but as a friend. Formulated positively, these remarks lead to an ethics of non-violent love, limiting secularisation and offering humanity a reference point in history. In sum, the commandment of loving one's neighbour substantiates the existential truth-claim of Christianity. Weak thinking can help mankind to break out of the control of objectifying and planning reason. With his view Vattimo reformulates at a theoretical level some of the popular answers to the contemporary discouragement and discontents with regard to modernity.

My main objection to Vattimo's interpretation of the existential core of the truth of Christianity is that it is incapable of suppressing or even diminishing violence. Above, I pointed out that the violence of objectifying, controlling reason followed the Enlightenment. I agree with Vattimo that there is such a thing as the violence of objectifying, controlling reason; the universality of its concepts violently reduces the richness and diversity of being and history to a dull sameness. But is the universality reason aims at necessarily violent? And furthermore, isn't there violence in subjectivist reason as well? I am referring here to the ruthless will of the contingent, historical subject to dissolve all substantiality, anything that gives content to life, whatever is sufficiently

worthwhile for people to devote their lives to, by considering them as constructions of the finite and local subject. Isn't the self-evidence with which this is stated also an act of violence? Notably, concepts like subjectification and the dissolution of strong structures get a similar universalistic status in comparison to that of objectification and the fixation of truth and value. Consequently, it is hardly clear why the universalistic character of objectification should be violent, whereas the equally universalistic character of subjectification would suppress this violence. Reflecting on this issue in an unbiased manner, one has to conclude that the method of subjectifying reason to reduce substantiality to a subjective construction is no less violent than the method of objectifying reason to reduce the same substantiality to established and controllable objects. Since Vattimo equates all objectifivation *by definition* with violence and oppression, he is convinced that the suppression of this objectification puts an end to all violence in the world. Therefore, he is blind for the violence that is present in subjectifying reason.

One could object to my critical remarks that Vattimo sees the caritas, the commandment of love, as a bound to secularisation and nihilism. His rejection of fixed, objective truth by no means ends in a nihilistic repudiation of all religion and ethics, but results in an ardent religious plea for a salvation which has commenced definitively with the incarnation of Christ. It seems important to me to take this objection seriously by examining whether caritas really can confine secularisation, nihilism and subjectification. In doing so, I hope not only to do justice to the intention of Vattimo's book, but also to examine the passableness of a route which is quite popular in the thinking of many committed Christians. The content of the commandment of love can be summarised most adequately in Augustine's maxim, *'Dilige, et quod vis fac'* (Love, and do what you will).[9] Vattimo regularly refers to the bond of friendship, which holds together God and humankind, and which is to replace the old relation of servitude. My critical question in this respect concerns not so much the content, but rather the nature of this commandment. What is the status of the commandment of love in the context of weak thinking?

9 G. Vattimo, *Belief*, p. 64.

According to Vattimo, "the commandment of love [...] cannot be secularised, because (if you will) it is a 'formal' commandment, not unlike Kant's categorical imperative, which does not command something specific once and for all, but rather applications that must be 'invented' in dialogue with specific situations and in light of what the holy Scriptures have revealed".[10] In my view, Vattimo introduces a foreign element here, which disorders his weak thinking completely. He states that the status of the commandment of love is comparable to Kant's categorical imperative. But how can we think this categorical essence of Christianity? Above, we saw that weak thinking dissolves every fixed meaning of humanity and the world into a thoroughly contingent, historical and local occurrence. In such a world, everything is hypothetical, i.e. subject to circumstance, place and time. How can something categorical arise out of this world, something that exceeds finitude and dependence on place and time? This seems to refer to a transcendent sphere. But Vattimo stigmatises this as sacral violence. It would re-establish the relation of servitude between God and humanity, jeopardising the very project of secularising Christianity. Consequently, the limiting of secularisation by the commandment of love is nothing but an arbitrary decision on the part of Vattimo as an individual. Once thinking begins to unmask every representation of the sacral, as well as the sacral itself, as violence, once secularised reason begins to demythologise morality and dogma as historical constructions etc., then it cannot stop short at the commandment of love as something sacrosanct anymore. If one wants to do this nevertheless, then such a decision appears from the perspective of radical nihilism as an expression of violent arbitrariness. It is impossible to be – as Vattimo seems to want to be – just a little nihilistic, and then, at the sight of certain fateful consequences, to try to switch sides quickly and indiscernibly.

4. Religion as the safeguard of the intrinsically true and good?

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor not only agrees with Vattimo's analysis of modernity, but also with his conclusion that modernity is in a

10 G. Vattimo, *Belief*, p. 66.

malaise. After a broad historical analysis of *'the making of the modern identity'* he systematically examines this malaise in the final chapter of his book *Sources of the Self*.[11] It is caused by the structural tension between the enlightened ideal of autonomous, rational self-possession and instrumental rationality on the one hand, and the sense that this ideal has repressed important elements of personal and social life on the other. This general remark shows once more that the malaise of modernity is not a coincidence, but the inevitable consequence of the failure of certain aspects of the project of the Enlightenment. Like Vattimo, Taylor considers Christianity to be capable of offering to contemporary man a way out of this malaise, thus substantiating the truth-claim of Christian religion in his own way.[12]

A first aspect of the malaise of modernity is a consequence of the detached (objectifying) and instrumentalist way of life and reasoning of the Enlightenment. It divests life of ultimate meaning. Our instrumentalist society is characterised by a utilitarian approach to values and ultimately to humanity itself as well. It is tied up with institutions that have a commercial, capitalist or bureaucratical way of acting. As a consequence of this, life loses its richness, depth and meaning; everything is in principle negotiable, has a price, nothing retains an intrinsic value. Instrumental reason threatens to reduce man to a production and consumption factor, to an object of medical care, to a locus of action for social normalisation and discipline etc.

No more room is left for heroism, aristocratic values, and the best things in life. In short, there are no substantial values that make life worth living, because everything is basically replaceable. Instrumental reason brings this about through the images of life, which it impresses (e.g. by the mass media), and through inducing and promoting an instrumentalist attitude towards life (e.g. by the consumer). In this way all traditional forms of community languish; they give way to contracts, based on mutual

11 Cfr. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 499 ff.

12 It is important to remark, though, that Taylor resists a general despair of civilisation with regard to modernity. He sees the malaise of modernity as the consequence of the degeneration of a (moral) ideal, which is worthwhile as such. Therefore we need repairs in order to restore the ideal of modernity in its full strength. Cfr. Ch. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*. Anasi, Concord (Ontario), 1991.

interest. This development isolates people, becoming calculating citizens. In sum, instrumental reason brings about a fragmentation of the 'self' and an atomisation of society.

However, we owe our contemporary conception of humanity not only to the universal, rational 'self' of the Enlightenment, but perhaps even more to the creative, individual 'self' of Romanticism. This is the other, often forgotten element in the development of modern identity. At the end of the 18th century, the conviction arises that every one of us owns an original way of being human, every person has his or her own measure. Consequently, everybody has to discover for him or herself what it means to be a person. This cannot be discovered by consulting already existing models and patterns, but can only be determined and expressed by the individual person in an absolutely original way. Taylor calls this ideal of individual and original self-expression 'expressivity'. This term refers to the link between the discovery of oneself on the one hand, and artistic creation on the other. In this context, the conception of what humanity typically is or ought to be changes dramatically: The philosopher, being the paradigmatic ideal of humanity during the Enlightenment, makes way for the romantic artist. Moreover, art is no longer primarily defined as imitation, *mimèsis*, of eternal models and patterns, but rather in terms of original creative power. Being faithful to myself thus means being faithful to my own originality, which I alone can discover and express. If I am not faithful in this way to myself, I miss my purpose in life, I miss what it means for *me* to be human. The ideal of authenticity thus attributes an essential moral importance to a kind of intimate contact with oneself, with one's inner nature.

Initially, the romanticists were convinced that the nature within man, the nature outside man, and Christian, institutionalised morality would make up a harmonious whole. But in the course of the 19th century, this conception of harmony came under increasing pressure. It was considered a remnant of the pre-modern, sacred order, which oppresses the originality and creativity of the individual 'self'. Under the influence of thinkers like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the conviction gained ground that humans are only loyal to their most intimate essence and destiny insofar as they resist all conformity, and eventually reject (institutionalised) morality as a suppression of their unique authenticity. This emotive, strictly individualistic notion of the 'self' is nowadays as dominant as the ideal of rational self-control.

The expressivist reaction to the dominance of instrumental reason, for its part, provokes the reverse side of the malaise of modernity, viz. the impasse of subjectivism. Nowadays, the ideal of the expressivist, individualist 'self' takes the form of the ideology of self-fulfilment. Its central values are self-realisation, self-determination, the discovery of one's own inner richness etc. As these words indicate, these values exclusively emphasise the isolated, individual 'self'. People often only accept something as true or good, if 'they can recognise themselves in it'. Consequently, the language of morals and politics, which is based on these values, sinks to a rather pale, subjectivist discourse on someone's strictly personal or private values. All values that cannot be reduced to one's own 'self', are shrugged off as illusory. Moral and intellectual opinions are usually not based upon reason or the nature of things, but upon the fact that we as individuals feel ourselves attracted to them, because they are an adequate expression of our original self-awareness. Consequently they lose all solidity and substance.[13]

Taylor criticises this completely subjectivist conception of self-realisation by showing that it destroys itself. A true conception of self-realisation presupposes that the importance of some things surpasses the 'self'. Similarly, there are conceptions of the good and ends of life that are worthwhile as such and offer an intrinsic fulfilment. A consequent subjectivism leads to emptiness; in a world where subjective self-fulfilment is the only thing that counts, any fulfilment loses its importance. This does not imply that subjectivism is bad as such. Rather it has to be joined to an idea of life that is orientated towards a notion of the good, which transcends the 'self'. We are confronted here with a typically modern problem. The explicit discourse of the modern 'self' consists of leaving open every substantial interpretation of the good, because this substance needs to come from the 'self'. But implicitly there are of course lots of substantial purposes and values, from which the 'self' derives its meaning. Since this implicit awareness is being suppressed by the modern conception

13 Ch. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 60 ff.

of man as a self-determining being, it constantly threatens to become what it desperately wants to avoid, viz. empty, meaningless, and therefore trivial. Thus modern men and women are confronted time and again with the necessity to choose between various different lifestyles. But at the same time they realise that every choice is arbitrary, because they have set their varying moods, subjective preferences and unconscious needs as the only standard for their choice. They suffer from what Milan Kundera called 'the unbearable lightness of being'.

Another aspect of the malaise of modernity results from the tension between universal moral norms and standards on the one hand, and conceptions of the good, functioning as sources of morality, on the other. The general agreement on moral norms and standards in our society hides a deep uncertainty and disagreement on what constitutes the good. Across all the religious, political and ideological divisions, modern society shows a remarkable consensus about vital moral standards and norms; usually, people agree that mankind has to take care of the lives and wellbeing of everybody, that justice among the nations needs to be promoted. Broadly speaking, humanity avows the human rights declaration as its universal moral creed. The fact that our actual behaviour often does not (sufficiently) satisfy these norms, that there is a lot of hypocrisy involved in people's subscribing to them, does not alter the fact that they are universally accepted. At the same time, however, modern people feel a fundamental uncertainty about the sources that are required to support their commitment to these far-reaching demands of morality and justice. These moral sources are positive values, – they refer to the good, which we strive for in our actions. For us as morally acting beings, it is essential to experience that it is worthwhile to help other people or to treat them rightly, to experience what human dignity implies, what it means that God's love is meant for all people etc.

What is at stake here, is the relationship between norms and values. In common parlance, these terms are often used indiscriminately. Nevertheless it is essential for the sake of moral action to determine their relation more precisely. Usually norms appear as obligations, formulated in a negative way: Thou shall not kill, thou shall not give false witness etc. Basically, they are characterised by an effective negativity. In this sense they put a stop to certain human desires. However, if these moral

norms only appear as obligations, as general demands of morality, they run the risk of remaining a dead letter. Then their negativity is no longer effective. This gives rise to a morality of obligation, which is merely repressive. But such a negative morality does not persist for very long and tends to become perverse. We only have to recall Nietzsche's criticism of Christian morality to get some striking examples of this tendency and to conclude that it is by no means imaginary. Therefore, it is important to fill out such norms with concrete experiences of the good. If the negativity of norms is to remain effective, they have to be counterbalanced by positive values. Thus, people need values or moral sources in order to commit themselves to moral norms. The fundamental problem of modernity in this respect is that a structural tension exists between these two dimensions of morality. The modern, procedural conception of ethics strongly advances a formal morality of obligation. But at the same time it results in the awareness that the importance of moral sources is being lost sight of. Above all, procedural ethics seeks to be religiously and philosophically neutral, it does not want to impose values on people. This neutrality has as its consequence that these values, experiences of the good, become something subjective and are driven back to the sphere of private life. There is hardly any public debate about them. In this way, these moral sources threaten to run dry.

5. Conclusion

Let us go back to the central issue of this article, viz. whether Christianity can offer something essential to modern humanity and its culture, thus 'proving' its existential truth. Can it offer a solution to the malaise of modernity? In the previous paragraphs, I have frequently spoken of the substantial good, of what is true and valuable as such – in short: of concepts referring to a sphere that surpasses instrumental reason and the isolated subject. It appeared to be necessary to introduce these notions as points of resistance in order not to be caught off guard by instrumentalist reason and the modern idea of individual self-expression. As is commonly known, Christian religion has a long tradition of attention to the intrinsically true and good. The *transcendentalia*, to put it in terms of medieval theology,

are not subjected to the instrumental and reductive thinking and acting of our times, because they are ultimately names proper to God, belonging to Him in an eminent way. The stories of the Bible and the Christian tradition bring contemporary people into contact with the content of these notions, offering them rituals, through which they can express and celebrate their gratitude for these gifts of God. This implies that people, who have a calling to speak about God, really offer something essential to and about contemporary man and society. We belong to a generation that has discovered the terrible consequences of the project of a self-willed, technically controlling and radically planning reason for civilisation. This has brought quite a number of people to recognising the importance of Christian religion as one of the safeguards of the intrinsically true and good.

Nevertheless, it would be too easy to put the blame for the malaise of modernity exclusively on the deadlock of the project of the Enlightenment. From a historical perspective we know that the Christian ideals of truth and goodness are as much interwoven with various kinds of exclusion and dominance as the ones of the Enlightenment. The highest spiritual ideals and aspirations of human history (both religious and non-religious) have laid the most crushing burdens upon mankind. They have often proved chalices filled with poison, and the causes of innumerable grief and even cruelty. At this point, the distressing question arises whether a choice in favour of these encompassing visions on man and the world necessarily implies that we have to take exclusion, oppression and terror into the bargain. If this is so, shouldn't we after all give up on such visions completely in favour of a sober, scientific, secular humanism, without any religious dimension or radical hope in history? As we all know, the Enlightenment chose for this option, and with good reasons. In the eyes of Vattimo too, the violence of sacral religion was the main reason to plead for secularising Christianity.

To me, it seems important to recognise these objections honestly. They put the credibility of any speaking about God in our time radically to the test, but they are by no means a definitive condemnation of its truth as such. From a historical perspective, one cannot reduce Christianity to being the source of suffering and oppression; it is also the origin of some of our deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations. Religion has incited

mankind to the highest expressions of our civilisation on moral, spiritual and cultural level. If only because of these historical reasons it is worthwhile to take up Vattimo's challenge to Christianity and ask whether it can be non-violent or at least less violent. Let us first deal with the question of what is at stake here philosophically. Contemporary philosophical thinking about God and religion is dominated to a large extent by the consequences of Heidegger's criticism of ontotheology. This implies, among other things, that metaphysics thinks of God as the highest being. This necessarily means that God (thought as ground) is drawn within the conceptual universe of man, thus becoming an object of controlling thinking. In the eyes of Heidegger, this is an inadmissible coup of reason. Therefore it is a manifestation of violence. In this situation he asks whether it wouldn't be better for philosophy to keep silent about God, at least for some time.[14] In my opinion, such a ban on philosophical speaking (however cautiously formulated) is utterly unphilosophical. Even not-speaking about God can be the subject of serious and original philosophical reflection.[15]

But although I do not agree with Heidegger's suggestion of silence, the substantial issue at stake here is highly relevant to contemporary people who want to speak about God, even philosophically. It is by no means an imaginary danger for modern thinking to draw God within the disposing power of reason. It then commits an extreme violence, not only against God, but against mankind as well. It not only deprives God of his transcendence; but moreover human reason conceives itself as something absolute. Thus thinking attributes a sacred legitimisation to the violence of its manipulating (technical and political) reason. It thinks of itself as something absolute, something that silences every reply. In the foregoing paragraphs I have shown which fatal consequences this hybris of thinking has produced. In order to avert this violence I want - from a philosophical perspective - to make an appeal to the idea of irreducible transcendence or 'indisposability'. With this I mean the recognition of a radical exteriority, the experience of something external that appeals to man from an absolute height (Levinas). This experience confronts reason

14 M. Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*. Neske, Pfüllingen 1957, p. 45.
15 Cfr. J. Derrida, 'Comment ne pas parler - Dénégations'. In: Idem, *Psyche - Inventions de l'autre*. Paris, Galilée, 1987.

with an unsurpassable frontier. Thus God's irreducible transcendence protects humanity from itself – more specifically from the deeply rooted temptation to act in a high-handed fashion, from the illusion that humans can freely and autonomously dispose of truth and value. It concerns the temptation of humanity making itself into a god, and by doing so justifying the violence of its manipulating (technological or political) reason. The awareness of God's irreducible transcendence confronts humanity with the illusory character of its desires and thus protects people against themselves. This transcendence is also a source of resistance against the violence of subjectifying reason, which reduces all truth and every value to a subjective construction and thus carries out a coup as well. Consequently, referring to transcendence is not as such something violent or oppressive, as Vattimo suggests. Against Vattimo I would state that the recognition of an irreducible transcendence offers the opportunity to suppress the violence that is deeply rooted in mankind. In my opinion this idea is a philosophical expression of a vital aspect of the existential truth of Christianity.

One can formulate this idea also in terms of the Christian tradition of faith. I am referring here specifically to the promise of a divine confirmation of man and world. It is implied in Christian faith that God cares about man's salvation. Its most exemplary expression is the incarnation of Christ, and the Spirit working in history. However, it is essential to realise that this salvation comes from God; His grace transcends this world. On the basis of the faith that God is God, Christian religion challenges every human claim to the fulfilment of the promise of God's salvation, every appropriation of the Spirit by humans, every human manipulation of truth and value. From a religious perspective, the vital issue of the eschatological reservation is at stake here.

With this, I conclude my analysis of the question how people who have a calling to speak about God can enter into a dialogue with contemporary culture. I tried to argue that a necessary condition for such a dialogue to succeed is showing that Christian religion offers something essential to contemporary man when he is looking for truthful answers to his existential questions. One of them is about the malaise of modernity after the breaking down of the project of the Enlightenment because of the violence produced by technically controlling and radically planning

rationality. With the help of some ideas of Gianni Vattimo and Charles Taylor, I have presented two very diverging answers to this question. In sum, the essential contribution of Christian religion to modern humanity lies in offering to humanity a perspective that protects people against the dangerous temptation of omnipotence. God's transcendence systematically brackets the self-willed character of man's reason and the violence resulting from it.

Summary:
This article offers a critical analysis of some contemporary attempts to bring up the issue of God and religion again in philosophical discourse, after the disenchantment of the project of the Enlightenment. At first the author analyses G. Vattimo's recent book *Belief*, in which he repudiates the violence and oppression of technically manipulating and politically controlling reason. In order to put an end to this violence, Vattimo argues in favour of a complete historicisation and secularisation of Christianity, which has *caritas* as its limit. The author criticises Vattimo on the point that his thinking leads to a subjectivation of religion and truth, and therefore is unable to stop the violence of reason. Secondly, Ch. Taylor's interpretation of the malaise of modernity is analysed. He considers Christianity as a safeguard of the intrinsically true and good, which enables contemporary thinking to overcome its subjectivism. As a conclusion, the author stresses the importance of the philosophical and religious idea of irreducible transcendence as confining the violence of self-willed thinking.